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FT Best of **Weekend long reads**

Asia and Australia holidays

Soukya: the Bangalore health retreat drawing a starry clientele – and interest from the NHS

It offers few luxuries and treatments include vomiting, yet it has become a royal favourite



The yoga and meditation dome at Soukya
Caroline Phillips YESTERDAY

I am lying on a wooden massage bed as two women rub my naked body with hot pouches of cooked rice, milk and medicinal herbs. They massage in tandem my legs, hip joints and up to my neck. A little gloop escapes the poultice bags each time and soon my body is covered with a gluey white residue. This is navarakizhi, a treatment claimed to reduce joint stiffness and relieve depression.

I'm at Soukya, a health retreat outside Bangalore that offers traditional Indian cures for conditions from hay fever to diabetes and strives to "restore the natural balance of your mind, body and spirit". Procedures run from massage, yoga and mud baths, to a three-week-long ayurvedic detox involving enforced vomiting, enemas and leech therapy. It is a serious place, lacking the five-star comforts and fripperies of many health spas, and yet has become the retreat of choice for some extremely wealthy and well-connected guests. Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall has been five times;

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has been three times (“Wonderful”, the archbishop scribbled in the guest book).

And, despite having only 25 rooms, its international influence is growing. Soukya’s founder, Dr Issac Mathai, is an international ambassador for the College of Medicine, based at Guy’s Hospital in London, and says he was instrumental in a new project that will see traditional ayurvedic treatments available on the National Health Service in the UK. The scheme, announced this month at a joint press conference by Prince Charles and Narendra Modi, the Indian prime minister, will offer yoga, ayurvedic dietary advice, cookery demonstrations and massage through a community NHS facility in North Kensington, while the University of Westminster monitors its success.

“This project will link medicine in India and the UK to provide new treatments supported by robust evidence from our academic partners,” says Dr Michael Dixon, chair of the College of Medicine, a general practitioner and medical adviser to Prince Charles.



Main building at Soukya

Coincidentally Dr Dixon is also staying at Soukya during my visit, a trip that begins with me being offered a lily, rose and marigold garland, a fresh glass of coconut juice and a contract. This stipulates I will stump up \$5,000 if I smoke in my bedroom or

drink alcohol during my stay and stresses that smuggling in non-vegetarian food will lead to instant discharge, with no refund (rates start at £2,800 per week). The rules — which also ban talking on a mobile anywhere outside my bedroom — are, apparently, in place to make the treatments more effective.

The retreat opened in 2002 and sits in 30 acres of organic farm by a suburban village on the outskirts of the city. White trumpet flowers cascade from branches, wind chimes tinkle in trees, tropical foliage looks to the sun. Three tethered sheep mow a lawn that's bordered by splashes of purple, burnt orange and fuchsia. Nearby women in grass-green saris and leaf-coloured headscarves pour pitchers of water on to marigolds. Suddenly a train blasts past at the bottom of the garden.



Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall, with Dr Isaac Mathai outside Soukya's Holy Trinity Chapel

Guests stay in villas dotted around the garden. Mine is decorated with a provincial Indian aesthetic and its bathroom is not so much tired as exhausted. The clientele may be starry, but they clearly don't come for chic interior design or pampering. There's no room service, mini bar or television, again said to be with guests' health in mind. The welcome pack is two books by Dr Mathai and white yoga garb. In place of the usual perfumed toiletries are home-made herbal options, including ayurvedic toothpaste.

Outside down paths lined with fluorescent blooms, there's a yoga and meditation dome, a shop (products include coconut sugar and herbal scrubs) and communal television area (although watching TV is deemed to interfere with the healing process). There's also a library rich in spiritual tomes, a swimming pool (with sunbeds in need of their own rejuvenation programme) and an Indian Orthodox chapel (each night a Christian thought for the day is placed on my pillow). Plus fields of organic fruit and vegetables, cows and goats. It's also very ecological: from its solar power and rainwater harvesting to the cows' dung converted to bio-gas to power their kitchen.



A vegetarian thali

It's soon time for lunch, served al fresco with lurid herbal drinks at blood temperature. The food is delicious, lots of little dishes of Indian specialities — delicately flavoured sauces with organic okra, lentils, just-picked spinach — none of it too spicy. It's made by chefs who pray daily for the healing of the guests, as do all the staff.

If that's all too much to swallow, it's seasonal, freshly prepared, low-fat, low-salt and ovo-vegetarian too. "Nutrition," says Dr Dixon, "is the most important factor in avoiding disease, even above drinking and smoking."



Chapel Drive

It's suggested that we eat "mindfully" but nobody uses the silence badges or adheres to the quiet zone sign in the dining room at dinner. At lunch I chat to Francesca Piamonte, an Italian interpreter at the European Commission. She's on her 13th annual visit here with her husband. "I came originally in emotional and physical crisis," she divulges. "Each time my health and habits improve more."

My health journey takes off after lunch. I have my first daily consultation with Dr Bindu Shridhar, a sari-clad naturopath. We talk for two hours but she's been known to do six-hour consultations. Then it's off to Dr Narayan Namboodiri, an ayurvedic doctor. Between them they address everything from family issues to dreams and bones, and examine possible health impacts from nutritional, lifestyle, sociological and environmental factors.



Dr Issac Mathai

I'm prescribed a programme of ayurvedic treatments, reflexology and liver packs (warm compresses covered in castor oil and rubbed on the abdomen). At a subsequent consultation with Dr Mathai, he considers their conclusions then prescribes "constitutional powders": sachets of homeopathic medicine that he says is "based on the person's nature, body and mental state".

My days soon become packed with treatments and therapy sessions — many starting with a prayer sung to Dhanvanthari, the god of ayurveda. There's also afternoon meditation: 45 minutes in a group of guests focusing on a candle or a mantra. But my monkey brain makes meditation unbearable, so I play hooky. I rise for daily yoga (gentle asanas done in a group at 7:15am) and retire at 9:30pm, exhausted.

On the rare occasions that I'm not supine, there are cookery classes on a two-ring stove in a dining room pungent with sandalwood and tours of the ayurvedic medicinal herb garden. Another day, I pay a visit to the on-site production facility where a man is reducing a cauldron of herbal concoctions for Soukya's medicated ayurvedic oils and potions, stirring it for a week.



Therapy area, reflex deck

After three days, I get ill with a fever; they call it a “healing crisis”: toxins leaving the body, apparently. Sceptics might question Soukya’s bolder claims, which include reversing or arresting conditions from multiple sclerosis to cardiovascular disease, but Dr Sabine Donnai, the London doctor who suggested I visit credits it with her own “detoxification and rapid recovery from radiotherapy and breast cancer”. She also cites positive results in a patient previously bedridden with chronic fatigue and in a schizophrenic, who returned free of voices. “I cannot,” Dr Donnai says later, “explain this in western medical terms.”

And what of my fellow guests? After daily acupuncture, Dr Dixon says he is suddenly able to move his frozen shoulder: “I can scratch my back for the first time in 10 years.” Meanwhile, portrait artist Annabel Merrett (recovering from chemotherapy and six cancer operations in 18 months) concludes: “I feel rebooted, balanced, strengthened and lightened.”

As for me, I leave with a filthy cough, a little bounce in my step, clear eyes and a 2.6kg weight loss. Whether it be Stockholm syndrome or a belief in the ancient wisdom of India, all those I spoke to, even the ones who endured enforced vomiting and

purgation, said they would return. And, though I'd bring earplugs for the train noise, I would too.

Details

Caroline Phillips was a guest of Soukya (soukya.com), which offers a week's stay and wellness programme from £2,800 per week.

Emirates has several flights per day from Dubai to Bangalore

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